

Testimony of

Dr. Billie J. Orr

to

Members of the

Senate Education Committee

Wednesday, April 6, 2011

Room 303 in the Capitol

Good afternoon Chairman Zinke and members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Dr. Billie Orr, and it is my honor to speak with you today in support of HB 603, the Charter School Bill.

I am a resident of Bozeman, Montana, and for the past four decades I have been very active in supporting public schools and promoting excellent educational opportunities at every level: classroom, school, district, state, and nationally.

I come before you today to share personal experiences I have had with the charter school movement as a public school parent, teacher, principal and associate superintendent for Arizona.

My first-hand experience began when I received my Doctorate in Education Leadership in 1994, the same year Arizona passed its state law allowing the creation of public charter schools. I do remember many in the education establishment and in the public schools being apprehensive about charter schools; however, our legislators showed great leadership and determination to put children and their families first, and they passed a charter school bill. At that time I was a principal in a traditional district public school in Scottsdale, Arizona, and our school community welcomed the competition and innovation that charter schools brought to the table.

As a public school principal I learned then, and I know now that the key to an excellent school is getting the decision-making responsibilities, resources, and dollars as close as possible to the child's classroom, in other words, at the school – not the district and certainly not the state. Charter schools are built on this model of governance; decisions, resources, and dollars at the school level. The teachers at my school and I sought waivers from our district and began to implement many of the innovative ideas we witnessed in charter schools. With the advent of charter schools in Arizona, teachers, parents and children had opportunities that had never existed before in our state.

In 1998 I was appointed to the position of Associate Superintendent of Education in Arizona and charged with creating academic and performance standards, state testing, and accountability systems for all K-12 public schools in Arizona, including public charter schools. I learned first-hand the positive influence of public charter schools.

1. Charter schools are public schools of choice. No one is assigned to a charter school. Everyone chooses to be there: teachers, students, and parents.
2. Charter schools are by nature more innovative because they are given greater autonomy and opportunity to make decisions that they determine to be best for their student body and professional staff.
3. Charter schools are held accountable academically and fiscally. As Associate Superintendent, I clearly had high expectations for our public charter schools.

- They were required to teach and meet all public school academic standards and held responsible for all financial reporting and high accounting standards.
4. If a charter school did not perform academically and in every way to satisfy their constituents, their students left and the doors were closed.
 5. Most of our charter schools were created by teachers and parents who saw an opportunity to improve academic performance and better meet the needs of students.
 6. Our charter schools were often centered on particular themes: high academic achievement with strong basic skills was a primary focus for many, but others emphasized math and science, technology, civics and history, performing arts.
 7. Competition was very good for the entire public school system. Everyone tried harder to meet the needs of their students. Simply stated, due to their autonomy, charter schools can be more responsive to their school community.

When I left the state in 2001 to work on education reform at a national level, we had 450 charter schools in Arizona. Today the state has over 500 charter schools, educating 113,000 students, and accounting for over 10% of the student population in the state.

I have heard comments from some that Montana is a rural state and could not support a charter school system. This is simply not true. Many of our best charter schools were located in small communities. As a parent, teacher, principal, or superintendent in a small community, I would welcome the opportunity to explore how a charter school option might provide greater flexibility, autonomy, and achievement within our current system.

Senators, today your leadership is critical in making a monumental step forward for public education in Montana. You have the opportunity to create the possibility for charter schools becoming a reality in our state. Please do not let this leadership opportunity slip away. Please do all in your power to give the children and parents in our great state a wider choice in their education by providing for the creation of public charter schools.

Thank you,

Billie J. Orr, EdD

500 Bridger Woods Road
Bozeman, MT 59715

406-451-6711
billieorr@aol.com